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SUBJECT: NEGOTIATING WITH IRANIANS: THE MEK IN IRAQ AS A
CASE STUDY

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Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Military Affairs Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

[11.](#) (S) Summary: In a case study of significant face-to-face dealing with Iranians, the Mujahedin e-Khalq (MeK) at Camp Ashraf in Iraq have been exasperating negotiators during six months of talks with Embassy and Multi-National Force) Iraq (MNF-I) interlocutors on their future in Iraq. We believe the group's negotiating style and tactics may provide some useful pointers for dealing with Iranians: the senior members of the group at Camp Ashraf are Iranian to the core, part of a generation that opposed the Shah and helped lead the country in the early days of the Islamic revolution. While they broke violently with the theocrats and hard-line clerics, we believe their lingering Marxist leanings and cult-like attributes have not diluted their "Iranian" approach to negotiations and their tactics may still be present in Iranian ruling circles. We have seen that approach manifested through hidden power relationships, detailed preparation for each session, hollow legal argumentation, tedious repetition of points of contention, and use of multiple tools to influence negotiations such as political lobbying, the media, street protests and recourse to international law to sway the discussions, all in an extravagantly hospitable, exaggeratedly friendly, culturally-attuned manner. End summary.

Background:

[12.](#) (S) For the last six months, Embassy PolMil MinCouns and the Commanding General in charge of MNF-I's Task Force 134 have met on a regular basis with the Iranian Mujahedin e-Khalq (MeK) leadership at Camp Ashraf to discuss the transfer of security responsibility for the Camp from the USG to the GoI, linked to the January 1 entry into force of the

U.S.-Iraq security agreement (reftels). The leadership of the group (numbering 3400) seeks to continue to function at Camp Ashraf for the indefinite future. Both the Iranian and Iraqi Governments are resolutely determined to remove the group from Iraq. The USG interest is to assure humanitarian treatment of the residents of Camp Ashraf, while acknowledging Iraq's right to manage this issue, and Embassy has obtained written GOI assurances to this effect. During the last five months, we have met the Camp Ashraf leadership on an almost weekly basis, more recently along with GOI representatives.

13. (S) While the MeK began its existence as a Marxist student group opposed to the Shah, and has progressively become more cult-like in its segregation of men and women and devotion to shadowy MeK leaders Massoud and Mariam Rajavi, we believe the leaders at Camp Ashraf (unlike the younger recruits who make up the majority of the camp population) share much in common with the generation of negotiators the Iranians might put forward in dealings with the U.S. in terms of their negotiating style and tactics, although philosophically they fundamentally oppose the thinking of the theocrats and hard-line clerics that guide the Iranian government. The group also shares some of the Iranian Government's well-developed tools: extensive networks of informants and a history of using intimidation and terrorism for its ends; coupled with an extremely sophisticated international media and lobbying apparatus.

Hidden lines of authority:

14. (S) A major observation we draw from our dealings with the leaders is what seems a favorite Persian tactic of obscuring lines of authority. While a nominal MeK "vice president" leads the team for discussions, and is apparently deferred to by the leadership group, her relationship with the MeK leaders in Europe is kept vague, and we have seen signs that others in the Camp may have much more influence than they ever reveal. The Vice President has never acknowledged that she was appointed by or receives any direction from MeK leadership abroad, but works off notes that may have been sent to her as very precise instructions for each negotiating session. The group's talking points -- at the table, in side conversations on the margins, or follow-up phone calls and e-mail -- are always identical. But there is no clear chain of authority, and we are unable to directly address or even fully understand the concerns and interests of those who are formulating the positions presented to us. The tactic seems to be to blur lines of authority to provide the most favorable position for the Iranian side.

Intensive preparations and research:

15. (S) We also note the group's detailed preparation for each discussion with minute attention to detail, including studying biographies of interlocutors and relying on networks of informants to gain information on the internal deliberations of those across the table. The MeK attempts to identify and exploit disagreements within the USG. For a group isolated in a camp in the Iraqi desert of Diyala with tightly controlled comings and goings, the group's use of the Internet and an international network of supporters to constantly check the latest news, including searches of USG websites for tidbits of information, is impressive. The group always seeks to table last-minute information, clearly seeking to catch interlocutors off-guard. They also use a cadre of Iranian lawyers purportedly trained in international law and well-paid foreign lawyers to scrub international law for favorable (though usually inapposite or highly strained) interpretations of every aspect of discussion. The group demonstrates a marked reliance on legal arguments, although they appear unwilling to actually engage in legal debate.

Rather, they rely on legal opinions purportedly issued by independent international lawyers and politicians; these opinions often appear to have been drafted by the group itself. When faced with a counterargument, the group simply repeats its talking points. This combination of intense preparation, coupled with an unwillingness to deviate from script when faced with rebuttal arguments, is a hallmark of the group. On the one occasion when they were caught off-guard) when a senior GOI representative came to Camp Ashraf unannounced) the nominal leader seemed so deeply uncomfortable that she had no scripted response, she was almost lost for words. Our attempts to prepare information on our interlocutors have been frustrated by their intensive attention to opsec preventing information gathering, and Qattention to opsec preventing information gathering, and careful control within the leadership over who is empowered to speak to outsiders.

"Red lines" that are not:

16. (S) In terms of negotiating format, the group goes to elaborate lengths to place talks in a formal setting. There is no recourse to one-on-one or small group meetings before the formal sessions or sidebars to discuss thorny issues. All substantive discussions are carried on at the table. Members of the team are proficient in apparently casual discussions away from the table but these are invariably used to reinforce talking points or pump interlocutors for information. Discipline in the group across the table is clear, and no matter how upsetting the news, they typically present a controlled, unified front. The group uses negotiating tactics such as establishing "red lines" but interestingly, what they claim is a matter of the highest principle can be conceded when expedient without a backward glance. The group also sometimes abandons arguments when it is pointed out that they are untenable. We have also observed a tactic by which the group makes unexpected but carefully thought-out concessions in a manner that makes it difficult for the other party to take advantage of, such as the unexpected delivery of information the Iraqis had been seeking at a time when the U.S. and GOI least expected it. Finally, like other regional negotiators, we sense that even when things are going the group's way, great efforts are made to make the other party think that the group is being sorely disadvantaged.

"Taqiyya" and just talking:

17. (S) Whether in keeping with the Shi'a doctrine of taqiyya -- concealment of the truth in extreme circumstances -- or simply as a negotiating tactic, our Iranian interlocutors have not hesitated to dissimulate. One town-hall meeting with Ashraf residents and GoI representatives degenerated into group chants and shouts that drowned out the Iraqi Government speakers. Although the protest was clearly pre-planned and scripted, the Ashraf leadership assured us it was a spontaneous outpouring of popular outrage that they only barely managed to contain. When speaking to the Iraqis, for example, they inevitably describe them as brothers, but when the Iraqis are out of the room, they immediately accuse the same individuals as being the malevolent agents of the Iranian regime. When it suits their tactical purposes, they feign a lack of ability to understand English. The Vice President, for instance, holds an advanced degree from a California university and clearly understands our presentations, but uses only minimal English on the margins of the meetings to exchange pleasantries. As an example of the lengths to which the group will go, we have seen it routinely exaggerate or invent support from international organizations) including ICRC and UNHCR) for their claims to international legal protections as "refugees," "protected persons," and even residents of a "diplomatic enclave" within Iraq. The group seems willing to make claims that are patently false, without concern that doing so will harm their

credibility or imperil future negotiations.

18. (S) Talking for the sake of talking is a favorite tactic of the group, as long as such talks delay hard decisions or distract from unpalatable choices. The group is willing to talk about almost any subject at great length (we have never had a session in which the Iranian side has felt they had "enough time" to finish presenting their case) as long as that discussion does not lead them to have to implement a change in behavior.

Bringing everything to bear:

19. (S) Our Iranian interlocutors bring every possible point of pressure to bear to influence talks. Our discussions at Camp Ashraf have only been a part of a full-court MeK press involving multiple pressure points and political theater: demonstrations by supporters in Western capitals, cadres of lawyers working on legal positions and challenges, sophisticated media campaigns and political lobbying. The group's focus on the media allows them to distract from difficult decisions by focusing on media statements (carefully choosing the most unreliable reports which their understanding of the media makes clear they realize are suspect). Within Iraq, the group has gone to great lengths to manipulate seams among Iraqis, such as quiet but active soliciting of support of Sunni tribal leaders and anti-Iran politicians (who send letters to the Embassy in support of their Iranian brothers at Camp Ashraf). They reach out to European parliamentarians and U.S. Congressmen to make their case. And even in the course of a meeting, they seek to create fissures in the team across the table. While their tactics are always subtle, in one recent incident an Ashraf lawyer let his guard down when he brushed aside the intervention of the senior Embassy representative and looked to the MNF-I representative with the remark, "We want to talk to the General."

Killing with Kindness:

110. (S) In keeping with the finest Persian traditions, our Iranian counterparts are invariably hospitable and disarming to their USG interlocutors, presenting honor guards and serving food) generally cakes and tea) with precision and flourish. And they have clearly gone to great lengths to understand the cultural background of those across the table. On our last meeting before Christmas, after an hour of airing grievances and dire warnings, they ended the session with an unexpected presentation of Christmas gifts and cards to the Embassy and MNF-I principals. On New Year's Eve, they offered enthusiastic New Year's greetings, while cheerfully pointing out that January 1 corresponds to neither the Islamic nor the Persian New Year. The strategy of disarming hospitality has extended to the local Iraqi Army commander who they provided with a prefab trailer as an office, Iraqi guards to whom they have provided space heaters, and their Iraqi neighbors in Diyala, who they provide jobs, utility service, and emergency health care.

Comment

111. (S) The MeK leadership at Camp Ashraf is an isolated ideological Iranian group in a dire situation with limited options. The Iranian government has deployed more sophisticated tactics in multilateral settings, but some of the roots of the Camp Ashraf group reflect currents still present in the ruling circles of today's Iran. We believe our extensive contact with Camp Ashraf offers a window into an undiluted strain of Iranian negotiating style and tactics*some elements of which could well be found across the table in any bilateral dealings with the Iranians.

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